

**“Through the Dignity of Work”:  
The Tension Between Hegemony and Counter-Hegemony in the  
Remediation of Homelessness Taking Place in Santa Cruz, CA**

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March 2021

## **Acknowledgements**

During the second half of 2020, amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, I conducted full-time field work with the organization Downtown Streets Team (DST) in Santa Cruz, California. I would like to take some space to honor all of the deeply meaningful work of DST and of my DST colleagues. To my DST colleagues, I profoundly appreciate and respect all of you so much. Thank you for putting your hearts into making Santa Cruz a better place and into DST's mission to ease the suffering of homelessness. Your mentorship, support, guidance, and friendship have meant everything to me. You all took me on as an intern at an especially uncertain time during the first few months of the COVID-19 pandemic and while DST was operating without a Project Manager; I got very lucky in spite of the circumstances and am so grateful for the opportunity. Even while we endured challenges related to staff issues, you all unwaveringly supported and prioritized me and the quality of my field study experience throughout really difficult times. An enormous thank you is owed to Andrea Steiner, Mary Beth Pudup, and Sarah Arantza Amador. I'm overwhelmed with gratitude for: all of the ways in which you made field study and capstone-writing happen for our cohort; your invaluable support; and your beautiful minds. To my Community Studies cohort, a group of my peers who I respect and admire so much: you all make my heart soar with pride, thank you for your devotion to justice, activism, and to a fairer world. Thank you to my family for making my undergraduate career possible and to my beloved friends for holding me and my sanity together. Lastly, with love and appreciation, thank you to the community members experiencing homelessness who have been my greatest teachers in the making of this analysis; my capstone is dedicated to you all.

## Introduction

Homelessness has become California's defining crisis, a crisis that seems to have no tenable, sure-fire, or far-reaching solution in sight. "Nearly half of all unsheltered people in the United States live in California, though the state accounts for just 12 percent of the U.S. population" (Fuller, 2020). Downtown Streets Team is one of the many organizations that constitute a patchwork of homeless services in California; this patchwork of homeless services primarily works to remediate the suffering of homelessness as it exists, but does not serve to solve the issue of homelessness as a whole. DST's mission is to "solve homelessness through the dignity of work," and the organization is a volunteer, work-experience program for people experiencing homelessness. Folks are called Team Members once they are enrolled in the program, and receive gift cards and case management in exchange for their work with the explicit goal for them to attain self-sufficiency, stable employment and housing. I was initially quite skeptical of DST's rugged individualist model that emphasizes involving unhoused folks in their own recoveries and journeys out of homelessness. With time however, it became very clear to me that DST's work-experience program acts as harm reduction for Team Members as well, which was my first indication that DST's model was more nuanced than I initially understood. This finding, and the many others that I uncovered during my six months of full-time field work in June-December 2020, led me to propose that hegemony and counter-hegemony are working side-by-side in DST's everyday operations. Though these are not the research questions that I set out on field study with, they are the research questions that now make the most sense to ask and that will

be answered in the following pages: What are the elements of Downtown Streets Team's (DST) work that shape its efficacy? What are the implications of structuring a program around the value of work? To what extent does DST adhere to, reproduce, challenge, or confront the status quo/hegemonic paradigms and why?

Downtown Streets Team is a robust, relatively-large, and well-resourced nonprofit primarily because its model, orientation, and operations predominantly employ hegemonic paradigms, including the high value placed on work through capitalism and rugged individualism. On account of this model, DST secures the support, funding, and collaboration of the wider community, local government, and service providers, which indicates its secure position within the shadow state and nonprofit industrial complex. Additionally, DST's hierarchical model and the exclusionary nature of its work-experience and leadership opportunities reproduce the social stratification under free market capitalism and reveal implications of power, positionality, and identity. However, DST's work-experience and leadership opportunities prove to cultivate dignity and wellbeing in a way that resembles harm reduction; this is profound considering that poor health is pervasive and among the many barriers that DST navigates in cultivating Team Members' success.

I was surprised to observe that counter-hegemonic paradigms, like harm reduction, valuing Team Member lived experience and expertise, and community-building, paradoxically coexist with hegemony in DST's work. I speculate that bleak affordable housing prospects among other structural failures in Santa Cruz exacerbate homelessness and escalate the desperate need for counter-hegemonic paradigms to remediate the subjugation and suffering of homelessness. Through DST's work,

hegemonic neoliberal ideology, conditions of scarcity, and violence are both upheld and negotiated at the individual level. Consequently, in DST's model, hegemony and counter-hegemony simultaneously operate in contradiction with one another. DST is not solving homelessness -- it is part of the machine that perpetuates it -- and yet, it has cultivated dignity, mitigated harm, and saved lives.

In this paper, I will first examine the ways in which DST operates within the shadow state and nonprofit industrial complex to importantly demonstrate how deeply embedded DST is in hegemonic systems and how deeply embedded hegemonic paradigms are in DST's model as well. Then, I will explore the various implications of structuring a direct-service organizational model around work, which chiefly include a discussion of: the reproduction of capitalist values; the intrinsic desire to partake in meaningful activity and to play a role in one's community; how structure, work, and productivity can function as harm reduction; how work and leadership can cultivate dignity and esteem the expertise of people experiencing homelessness; and the reinscription of hierarchies/social stratification through said work-based models. I will also touch on how DST aims to change community perceptions of homelessness, and the implications of this goal. Finally, my paper will assess how although DST reinforces neoliberal paradigms, the organization navigates scarcity for Team Members through case management and community-building. Throughout, I intend to highlight the contrast between hegemony and counter-hegemony as they appear in the multitude of ways that DST operates. If my analysis is correct, then I would suggest further consideration of how the counter-hegemonic strengths of homeless services can be

more widely utilized to value the humanity, expertise, community, and resilience of folks experiencing homelessness.

## **Methods**

### **On research and positionality**

On field study, I could be found most frequently in DST's office or outside in the Santa Cruz community chiefly participating in case management, administrative tasks, work shifts with Team Members, and outreach to the wider unhoused community. Due to the pandemic, I also worked from home a fair amount, which largely consisted of taking part in staff Zoom meetings. I took 169 pages of field notes on field study, documenting all that I was learning, observing, and taking part in. The findings that I present in this paper are primarily sourced from my own field notes and my analysis of them. I will also draw from an array of academic literature and other key sources that inform my analysis. This paper can be characterized as an ethnographic work as it reflects on a particular sub-population in Santa Cruz and the systems in which they are enveloped. It is from this ethnographic perspective that my paper will seek to make sense of the efficacy and implications of a nonprofit organizational model that is structured around the value of work and that serves people experiencing homelessness.

In order to carefully construct this analysis with integrity and transparency, I must acknowledge my positionality as a researcher. I am a white, cis-gender woman, from an upper-middle class background, who has never experienced homelessness. I know that by virtue of my presence while writing this paper, my biases will be present as well. There may be instances in this paper in which I am unable to fully understand or speak to the painful truths wrought by unjust systems and unfair circumstances. It is my great

hope that I am respecting the lives, personhood, and humanity of the people experiencing homelessness mentioned in this paper. It is my intention to center marginalized lives and experiences and to speak to power. However, I know that researching and analyzing human subjects will never be perfect and has implications of exploitation for academia. I will be using pseudonyms for every person named in my paper from this point on, with the exception of naming DST staff members in my Background section, which draws from information that is publicly-available on DST's website. I know that people experiencing homelessness, who are so often invisibilized subjects in society, deserve for their lives to be known and for their names to be spoken if they consent to it. However, I will use pseudonyms so that there isn't a distinction between who gave me permission to use their name and who did not, considering that it may have been impossible to get in touch with every person mentioned to ask their permission.

### **Theoretical frameworks**

I will use hegemony and counter-hegemony, as they are theorized and defined by Marxist scholar, Antonio Gramsci, as guiding frameworks in my analysis to think through and demonstrate how contradictory processes and paradigms make up DST's work. Gramsci theorizes that state hegemony requires the consent and coercion of civil society which ensure "the durability and stability of the violence of the state by making that violence, in another of Weber's terms, 'legitimate'" (Hoare & Sperber, 2016, pp. 122-4). For Gramsci, hegemony stresses "the cultural and moral dimensions of the exercise of political power" (Hoare & Sperber, 2016, p. 118). Additionally, the "terrain on

which hegemony is built and actively defended is that of ideology” (Hoare & Sperber, 2016, p. 126). This means that the dominant class, who are the agents of hegemony, ensure that hegemony and common sense coincide in order to win the consent of the other classes of society (Hoare & Sperber, 2016, p. 126). Gramsci’s theorization draws on Marxist theory; Marx asserts that the ruling class determines dominant ideology which serves to maintain their power by making “men and their circumstances appear upside-down” (Marx & Engels, 2012, p. 143). In other words, the ruling class maintains their material interests by using ideology to naturalize capitalism and its conditions (Marx & Engels, 2012). The hegemonic paradigms present in DST’s work (see Table 1) and the unequal, unjust conditions that they produce and perpetuate, are largely interpreted as natural and legitimate in society. Based on Gramsci’s theory of hegemony, counter-hegemony can be characterized as the means by which people propose, adopt, and practice alternatives to dominant and oppressive ideologies and institutions.

Table 1. Hegemonic Paradigms and Counter-Hegemonic Paradigms that Appear in DST’s Work

Hegemonic paradigms	Counter-hegemonic paradigms
The shadow state and nonprofit industrial complex	Harm reduction
Capitalist ideologies like rugged individualism and the myth of meritocracy	Centering and valuing the lived experience and expertise of marginalized folks like people experiencing homelessness
Hierarchy and social stratification	Community building and the moral economy



The hegemony of neoliberalism is of particular importance to my analysis as all of the hegemonic paradigms listed in Table 1 and explored in this paper are related to and supported by neoliberalism. Neoliberalism values free-market competition and rejects Keynesianism and “collectivist strategies;” additionally, the neoliberal paradigm intensely prioritizes and promotes “the virtues of free trade, flexible labor, and active individualism” (Peck & Tickell, 2002, p. 381). Another key aspect of neoliberalism that must be noted is disinvestment from the welfare state coupled with investment in the military, police, and prisons (Goldberg, 2011). Just as wealth disparities and inequality were exacerbated by the rise of neoliberalism in the 1980s, so too, was homelessness; “the ancient social problem of homelessness had reemerged” (Gowan, 2010, p. 45).

## **Background**

### **On Santa Cruz, CA and homelessness**

Dr. Steve McKay’s research project, *No Place Like Home*, cites Santa Cruz as the least affordable small city in the United States, meaning that its average cost of living (rent and other necessities) to average income ratio is the highest of any small city in the U.S.. Among the most decisive drivers of homelessness is the high cost of housing, a factor that correlates with higher rates of homelessness in any given area, according to Jill Cowan (2019). The desirability and housing crisis of Santa Cruz County can also be attributed to: where it’s situated, roughly 40 miles from the Silicon Valley and 70 miles from San Francisco; its smaller size that is already largely built out; “and its policy to remain compact, with clearly defined boundaries,” which makes the housing market is extremely competitive and pricey (Moffat, 2004, p. 26). According to the *No*

*Place Like Home* study, close to 70 percent of renters in Santa Cruz County are rent-burdened. Rent-burden is commonly, and in this study, defined as spending more than 30 percent of one's income on rent. This is a major contributor to the precarity that is so prevalent in Santa Cruz by virtue of the city's unaffordability.

There is no one definitive cause of the homelessness crisis in Santa Cruz County; it's a complex and persistent problem (Pudup, 2017), though the housing crisis is certainly a decisive factor. Since the 1980's, national policies have supported the deregulation of rental housing markets, the power and rights of tenants have slowly eroded, and in 2017, Santa Cruz eliminated "city and county funds for tenants legal protection" (No Place Like Home). While California is the richest state in the nation, it has "one of the highest poverty rates in the country, driven to a large degree by high housing costs," (Fuller, 2020) and the latest 2019 Homeless Census counted 2,167 unhoused folks in Santa Cruz County. When comparing the 2019 Homeless Census and 2019 general census, it's clear that Black, Indigenous, people of color (BIPOC) and folks with disabilities are disproportionately represented among people experiencing homelessness (see Table 2); it's important to recognize these discrepancies and the societal forces, like systemic racism and ableism, that drive them when talking about homelessness.

Table 2. Santa Cruz County General Population vs. Homeless Population

	The general population of Santa Cruz County in 2019	People experiencing homelessness in Santa Cruz County in 2019
Percent that identifies as white	87	67
Percent that identifies as Black	1.4	8
Percent that identifies as Native American	1.9	10
Percent with at least one disabling condition	8.8	39

Sources: 2019 Santa Cruz County Homeless Census and Survey, United States Census Bureau

### **On Downtown Streets Team**

In 2005, Eileen Richardson, the founder and CEO of Downtown Streets Team (DST), took a break from her career in the tech industry and was inspired to take over the Business Improvement District (BID) in Palo Alto. Richardson and Palo Alto’s BID launched DST’s first team in 2005 with \$45K and four Team Members, and by 2007, DST became its own certified nonprofit. DST’s funding comes from a mixture of government grants/contracts and private donors. After majorly expanding in the last 10+ years, DST is now in the top 1% of nonprofits when measured by size, which takes funding and the number of employees into account (Field Notes, 7/24/20). DST currently operates in at least a dozen communities around northern California. It began operating in Santa Cruz in October of 2017, after three city councilmembers on the Homeless Coordinating Committee recommended DST five months earlier as an actionable solution to end homelessness. In Santa Cruz alone, there are seven different

teams, each comprised of at least three Team Members, that clean up trash around Santa Cruz County five days a week. These seven teams include: Downtown, Levee, Beach, Harvey West, Syringe, North County, and Emeline. During my time with DST, roughly 40-60 Team Members were involved in Santa Cruz at any given time.

The basic aspects of DST's program, as it operates in Santa Cruz, consist of: work shifts on which Team Members clean up trash around the county or participate in estuary restoration; opportunities for Team Member promotion and leadership that allow team leaders to run shifts independently and take on more responsibility; case management; and participation in team success meetings that focus on celebrating the successes of Team Members and on building community. Team Members are not employed by DST. Rather, it is a volunteer program that compensates Team Members for their "work hours" with basic-needs stipends, or gift cards. In Eileen Richardson's biography on DST's website, she says, "unhoused people are the solution to homelessness," which falls in line with DST's general philosophy that people experiencing homelessness should be empowered to take an active role in their own recoveries. DST is an apolitical organization that is committed to a direct-service approach to remediating homelessness. Additionally, I have heard several DST staff members credit the direct-service and rugged-individualist organizational model for DST's broad appeal across the political spectrum.

### **On the COVID-19 pandemic**

I'm sure that there are a myriad of ways in which the pandemic altered everyday life of the unhoused community that I am unaware of and will not touch on. However, I

can speak to a few ways that the pandemic impacted the unhoused community and DST operations. Related to the wider unhoused community, the pandemic's emergence influenced Santa Cruz County to open up significantly more sheltering space (York, 2020), and while on field study, my supervisor expressed to me that since the pandemic began, more Team Members were sheltered rather than sleeping outside or elsewhere, than ever before. Additionally, DST staff and the staff of other county and non-profit services agreed that cross-organizational collaboration deepened during the pandemic. Related to DST in particular, most of DST's operations were totally suspended at the beginning of the pandemic before I started my field study, including work shifts, in-person case management, and team success meetings. Before I arrived at DST, and when I began my work with DST, operations slowly started-up again. By the time that I was well into field study, case management was happening in the office with a limited person-per-room capacity, shifts were operating five days a week again, and we were able to hold just a few outdoor team success meetings. The suspension and irregularity of team success meetings since the emergence of the pandemic was among the most consequential impacts for Team Members and for community-building; I heard from several Team Members on field study that they greatly missed these meetings.

### **Operating under the shadow state and nonprofit industrial complex**

After learning about the many contracts that DST maintains with local governments (Field Notes, 7/24/20), I knew that DST was securely located within the shadow state and nonprofit industrial complex (NPIC); DST is a direct-service and apolitical nonprofit that adheres to hegemonic paradigms that make it popular, well-resourced, and a part of the depoliticized effort to remediate homelessness without

upstream solutions. For these reasons, I argue that while DST remediates the harm and suffering of homelessness at the individual level, it is also a part of the hegemonic capitalist system that perpetuates homelessness. Wolch (1990) defines the shadow state as "a para-state apparatus" constituted by private agencies that carry out "welfare state functions, providing essential human services, financial and in-kind benefits, and surveillance of clients. In these activities, it [the shadow state] is enabled, regulated, and subsidized by the state" (p. 41). Relatedly, Smith (2007) characterizes the nonprofit industrial complex as the relationships between the state, the owning class, and the third sector that serve to surveil and limit leftist political ideology and social movements (pp. 3, 8). Through the NPIC, nonprofits are used to regulate social justice, protect owning class interests, and maintain capitalist state legitimacy (Smith, 2007, p. 3). Wolch (1990) agrees with Smith's statement, writing that "voluntary sector outputs are important to the continuing legitimation of the state, by allowing individuals the right of free association and voluntary initiative and so diverting demands for greater social justice" (p. 29).

Operating under the shadow state and NPIC, DST reproduces hegemonic capitalist ideology and models itself "after capitalist structures rather than" challenging them (Smith, 2007, p. 3). In doing so, and through the tight relationships that DST forms with local governments, DST is subject to those local governments' requests and benefits from their prioritization of Team Members/DST operations. On account of the contracts that DST maintains with the city and county of Santa Cruz, local government requests of DST often dictate how, when, where, and to what extent DST operates. The

city and county of Santa Cruz think so favorably of DST that they would like DST's role to grow and expand beyond its current parameters.

Anytime the county has a problem regarding homelessness, they say, "why don't we get DST to do it?" Recently they wanted us to manage an encampment, but obviously Dan had to turn it down. He said it's not the first time we've gotten that request (Field Notes 9/30).

In addition, and as I stated above, DST's contracts with Santa Cruz local government often dictate its organizational operations, more specifically, where and how often Team Member work shifts are conducted. During my time with DST, the city and county of Santa Cruz asked our Project Manager to add more shifts to the North County and Levee routes. One day the DST staff chatted about how frustrating and unnecessary it was to have to add these extra shifts at the county's request.

There is already little trash on that route [North County] in the morning, so it's hard to imagine that extra shifts in the afternoon are going to be useful... The Levee really doesn't require two teams and Team Members are out there making circles. It's frustrating that it seems like the county doesn't fully understand the conditions and needs on the ground and that they seem to be motivated by politics and optics, (Field Notes, 12/1/20).

Not only does Santa Cruz local government seem to be out-of-touch with the conditions on-the-ground, but they seem to be motivated by optics, both of which resulted in a poor distribution of resources allocated to remediate homelessness.

During the last few months of my time with DST, we conducted quite a bit of outreach at the Vets' Hall shelter and at county-sanctioned encampments to the wider unhoused community. DST staff primarily took this outreach on as a favor to the county, and we periodically checked in with a Santa Cruz county employee, Sonya, about the outreach that we were doing for her. I realized that at times, what we reported to Sonya surprised her, because despite working on the local system of homeless services, her distance from the issue on-the-ground interfered with her understanding of it (Field Notes, e.g. 9/14/20, 9/28/20, 10/22/20). However, DST's close relationship with Sonya and other city and county officials proved to be extremely useful to us and to Team Members at other times (Field Notes, e.g. 10/15/20).

A great example of this in another community that DST operates in came up when I learned that Team Members are prioritized by supportive housing and shelters in that community (Field Notes, 11/2/20). My supervisor, Sarah, and I remarked on just how much communities must love DST's model and the idea that unhoused folks who are working are somehow more "deserving" (Field Notes, 11/2/20). Overall, government response to homelessness is not only lacking, inadequate, and out-of-touch with the problem on-the-ground, but it also prevents upstream solutions that would meaningfully solve homelessness. Local government's failure to meet the need and their prioritization of nonprofit models that reproduce hegemonic paradigms are exceptionally illustrative of their non-commitment to equity, social justice, and upstream solutions.

### **The significance and implications of a work-based model**

My findings on field study with DST indicate that a work-based organizational model reinforces hegemonic paradigms of rugged individualism and capitalist



hierarchies/stratification while also allowing certain counter-hegemonic paradigms to manifest, like harm reduction and centering the lived experience and expertise of people experiencing homelessness. While these counter-hegemonic paradigms are meaningful, hopeful, and telling about the opportunities to better center and involve people experiencing homelessness in our communities, DST's work-based nonprofit model reveals how entrenched capitalist ideology is in our welfare state. Reproducing hegemony, like capitalist ideology and stratification, through the means by which our society attempts to remediate the ills of capitalism, is not so much a solution but an extension of capitalist social control and inequality. In the passages that follow in this section, I will investigate both the hegemony and counter-hegemony as they appear through the work-experience and leadership opportunities that DST provides for people experiencing homelessness.

### **The value that capitalism places on work**

Weber (2003) asserts in his writing that Protestant work ethic and asceticism played a profound and early role in shaping the spirit of capitalism, particularly in the United States. Weber (2003) writes that this spirit of capitalism is characterized by an imperative to work "as an end in itself," but also to demonstrate one's morality, redemption, and good character (p. 51). The prevailing idea in the U.S. that work is a signifier of morality, rooted in the country's post-colonial Protestant origins, molded and still structures its welfare state that relies on a distinction between the "deserving" and "undeserving" poor (Rosner, 1982). Downtown Streets Team maintains that its model recruits Team Members as active participants in their own "recoveries" and journeys out

of homelessness through work experience. This model deploys the rugged individualist idea that people must take “personal responsibility” for remediating the poverty that they are experiencing, which makes them “more deserving” of the help that they do receive.

Rosner (1982) details the history of the distinction between the “deserving” and “undeserving” poor in his work, expressing how deeply embedded Christian ideas of worthiness are in the United States’ welfare state (pp. 355-6). The United States has demonstrated consistent concern for preventing dependence on welfare because of the dominant idea that dependence is tied to poor individual character and morality; the U.S. has consequently prioritized welfare programs and policies that promote self-sufficiency, like work requirements (Rosner, 1982, pp. 357-81). DST’s model provides work-experience and leadership opportunities for people experiencing homelessness, and in doing so, capitalizes on and benefits from the high value that capitalism places on work. After all, the spirit of capitalism “has the highest ethical appreciation of the sober, middle-class, self-made man” (Weber 2003, p. 163). The hegemonic paradigm of rugged individualism is very present in DST’s model and is something to be wary of reproducing in the sites of social change where equity and the inherent worth of every person must be prioritized.

### **People want to work: meaningful activity and wellbeing**

One of the most surprising findings from my time with DST was that Team Members yearned to take part in productive and meaningful activity, and that working in DST’s program acted as a form of harm reduction for many of them. Maté (2010) writes that “harm reduction means making the lives of afflicted human beings more bearable,

more worth living. That is also the goal of harm reduction in the context of addiction” (p. 314).

Among the most profound occurrences that I witnessed while working with Downtown Streets Team were the ways in which work shifts helped many Team Members better manage their addictions and mental illnesses and how working instilled a sense of dignity, pride, and confidence in Team Members. In my analysis, I characterize these phenomena as products of counter-hegemonic paradigms that are significant aspects of DST’s work. For many Team Members, securing formal employment seemed out of their reach or comfort zone, or it just wasn’t a viable option for a myriad of reasons that chiefly included: lack of vital identification documents, addiction, mental illness, criminal background, unstable/unsafe living conditions, living in a state of crisis, experiencing unemployment for a prolonged period of time, and the trauma that is the experience of homelessness. Additionally, formal employment doesn’t provide a key aspect of harm reduction that DST does provide, which is unconditional positive regard; Team Members were able to leave the team and rejoin as many times as they liked without DST judging or criticizing them or their choices (Patterson, 1985).

Based on the new perspective that I gained from getting to know Team Members, I find that the market defines a “worker” quite narrowly and doesn’t accommodate for a wide range in ability or personal circumstance. Bourgois and Schonberg (2009) use the term “lumpenproletariat,” a designation originally theorized by Karl Marx, to describe people who are “too marginal” to fall into the “reserve army of the

unemployed,” (p. 17) which is a designation that could describe unhoused folks who aren’t accommodated by the market’s narrow definition of a worker.

Through DST’s work-experience program, Team Members are able to benefit from the positive aspects of employment without really being employed, which is why I argue that DST, to some extent, bridges a gap for those who face barriers to employment. Because DST is a volunteer program that compensates with gift cards rather than with a wage, Team Members don’t need to have their vital documents to participate. Many Team Members don’t have any vital identification documents (birth certificate, ID, social security card) when they join DST, and obtaining those documents is one of the first things that Case Managers usually do with new Team Members, though it can take months to successfully achieve (Field Notes, e.g. 7/30/20, 10/16/20, 11/2/20). As I mentioned above, the barriers to employment that Team Members come up against are vast, but one clear example that appears in my field notes is Team Member Arthur’s struggle with anxiety that kept him from maintaining employment despite his success as a team leader with DST.

When Arthur came into the office for payout, we asked him how his new job with the county is going for him. He told us that it didn’t work out because of his anxiety and that he’s most comfortable with DST at the moment, (Field Notes, 9/3/20).

Some Team Members were so comfortable with DST, that they weren’t interested in pursuing formal employment and never intended to leave DST if they could help it. This dilemma was present in a number of communities that DST operates in, and we in

Santa Cruz experienced it with a few Team Members, including Forest. Forest once said to me, “I want to be here, there’s nothing else I want to be doing except this,” referring to DST as his long-term plan” (Field Notes, 11/16/20). Team Members receive \$5 worth of gift cards for every hour that they volunteer with DST; although this compensation is not a formal wage, Team Members and community members alike sometimes criticized this detail. It’s important to consider that under conditions of scarcity, people experiencing homelessness are vulnerable to exploitation, while also remembering that DST’s program meets a need that the free market fails to provide, which is meaningful activity for a diverse range of people.

Team Members often told me that they desperately needed something productive to do during the day, frequently citing it as a reason why they got involved in DST. One time, I was speaking on the phone with a Team Member, James, and he expressed the following to me:

We were discussing his friend, Leah, who’s on the waitlist. He told me that he’s really worried about her and that he wants her to get on the team ASAP because she needs something to keep her busy (Field Notes, 8/4/20).

James advocating for his friend to join DST demonstrated to me that he clearly understands how important meaningful activity is for personal wellbeing. Just a few days later, I was asking Ray, another Team Member, if he might be interested in writing something for the DST blog. He considered my offer and said with a chuckle,

“Writing might give me something to do besides hang on the levee and get chased by police.” ... This makes me think of how Helena will print out short stories and give them to our Team Members who like to read because she says

that it helps them pass the time and distract themselves from drinking (Field Notes, 8/6/20).

The longer I spent with Team Members, the more abundantly clear it became that work was acting as a type of harm reduction in many of their lives. For Team Members, picking up trash in the community on shift, participating in estuary restoration, and working on other tasks assigned by DST instilled a sense of personal purpose, facilitated feelings of community involvement, promoted dignity, built self-confidence, improved mental health, and reduced substance abuse.

The literature on harm reduction and on the wellbeing of people experiencing homelessness agrees that meaningful activity can play a substantial role. Boucher et al. (2017) write that addicts in their study “suggested that community-based harm reduction services should incorporate more opportunities for people who use drugs to participate in activities or environments in which they are likely to be distracted” (p. 9). Furthermore, addicts participating in that study considered certain practices to be part of their harm reduction toolbox, such as: maintaining routine, keeping active, and staying busy (p. 8). When applied to the unhoused community, these ideas should be considered as particularly consequential because people experiencing homelessness struggle with boredom, which can “have serious implications for the mental well-being, community integration, and substance use of this population” (Marshall et al., 2019, p. 358).

The primary driver of boredom among people experiencing homelessness is the lack of opportunity to participate in meaningful activity (Marshall et al., 2019, p. 365). One particularly illustrative example of work as harm reduction came up very early on in

my field study. Before I began my work with DST, COVID-19 had just emerged and DST completely called off shifts for the first few months of the pandemic. During that time, Team Members still received their stipends, and Case Managers tried to do the best that they could communicating with Team Members over the phone. During a staff meeting, my colleagues expressed how detrimental that period without work was for Team Members. Many Team Members' substance abuse relapsed during that time (Field Notes, 7/14/20). Marshall et al. (2019) report, "The rate of mental illness and substance use among homeless persons is known to be high, with approximately two thirds of homeless persons reporting a lifetime prevalence of each" (p. 366).

Herein, we as a community are presented a difficult problem, which is that the homelessness crisis is characterized by: serious trauma brought on by the experience of being unhoused; a prevalence of mental illness and substance abuse to self-medicate said trauma, pain, and illness; and an acute shortage of solutions, resources, and opportunities for unhoused folks to engage in the community. Providing people experiencing homelessness with equitable opportunities to engage in meaningful activity is, and must be, part of the equation in remediating the violent harm and exclusion that has been wrought on our unhoused neighbors. While the universal human right to housing could be considered the ultimate counter-hegemonic solution, the right to meaningfully engage in the community is another necessary counter-hegemonic paradigm, and one that is the focal point of DST's work.

### **Team Member leadership**

One of the most profound means by which DST's program cultivates dignity, agency, confidence, and wellbeing, is through opportunities for Team Member

leadership. This aspect of the program is part of the work-experience model, and Team Members who occupy positions of leadership experience similar benefits to those of DST's basic work opportunities, but in a more pronounced way. I found that Team Members drew upon their lived experience of homelessness in their leadership positions so as to be the most effective leaders that they could be. In this process, DST's model centered and valued the lived experience and "lay expertise" of homelessness, which is counter-hegemonic in nature and comparable to the counter-hegemonic paradigm of centering the margins. Additionally, while the lived experience of homelessness was especially valued and centered in leadership roles, it also was utilized by and valued in all Team Members, including those who didn't occupy leadership positions. All Team Members were encouraged to participate in peer-to-peer outreach to the wider unhoused community while on shift and to apply their lay expertise in other ways. For example, one day my colleague Andy and I met with Lynne, a community member who has historically led estuary restoration projects for Team Members to participate in. During this meeting, she described her finding that many unhoused folks who live along the Levee know more about the natural environment and the local ecology than any average person in the community. She learned this after doing estuary restoration on the Levee with her friends and talking to the unhoused folks in the area who from living outside are incredibly attuned to the nature around them (Field Notes, 11/16/20).

In the field of health, existing literature suggests that centering and empowering the lay expertise of patients is valuable, worthwhile, and counter-hegemonic in its confrontation of conventional knowledge and power structures. In the area of harm



reduction in particular, centering patients' lay expertise and lived experience of drug use has brought unique advantages and enhancements to the table (Jauffret-Roustide, 2009, p. 160). More specifically, drug users bring their life skills to the work, skills that "highlight the technical, social, physical and moral dimensions" of their expertise and that "sometimes questions specialist knowledge" (Jauffret-Roustide, 2009, pp. 167-8). Hartman (2000) writes that the "subjugated knowledges" of often-marginalized patients and clients "have been exiled from the 'legitimate domains of formal knowledge,'" which drives her argument that social workers must collaborate with clients and empower clients' expertise (pp. 20-2). The fields of health, harm reduction, and social work are adjacent to the work that DST does, and the evidence that lay expertise must be centered is clear. DST's model is quite unique in that Team Members, who might usually be designated as "subjects of charity and assistance," are promoted into leadership, their lay expertise is valued, and their empowered positions are really what drives DST's efficacy and everyday operations.

Although DST is not a grassroots organization and there is a clear distinction between staff and Team Member based on authority and organizational roles, Team Member leadership nonetheless facilitates team independence and is critical to making the work-experience program and entire organization operate effectively. Furthermore, team leaders use their lay expertise and lived experience of homelessness to do their most effective work, which constitutes one of the counter-hegemonic paradigms that show up in DST's operations. For example, team leaders empathetically supported their peers through their shared experience of homelessness, which cultivated successful

teamwork; leaders often knew where the most trash would be and made adjustments to daily routes accordingly, based on their intimate knowledge of the streets and of ever-shifting encampments; lastly, leaders were exceptionally skilled at discerning between items that needed to be thrown out and belongings that someone would come back for, as well as between active camps that shouldn't be disturbed and abandoned camps that should be cleaned up. The following passage from my field notes highlights the distinction between the expertise of a team leader, Patricia, and of myself.

Occasionally Patricia and I would venture down the bank towards the edge of the river where active and abandoned camps resided, often hidden by brush...

Patricia said, "I know this camp looks pretty trashy, but I'm pretty sure it's active and we don't want to disturb it, because it really scares them. It really scares them when they come back and their things have been moved around." I realized that I never thought about that, that somebody would take notice that their things had been moved or removed when their camp was in such disarray already, but Patricia was right (Field Notes, 7/21/20).

### **Hierarchy and stratification in a work-based model**

Patricia quit the team towards the end of my time with DST despite being an exceptional, passionate leader and a self-proclaimed homeless advocate. She expressed that the most decisive reason for her quitting was that the group of leaders felt like a "boys club" that cast her on the outside (Field Notes, 11/6/20). After Patricia quit, there were no women left among the team leaders; she was the only female leader during my entire 6 months with DST. Not only did DST struggle to retain its only female

leader, but its work-based model struggled to provide equitable opportunities for participation and leadership to begin with. I remember sitting in the park one day with the female Team Members of DST's Women's Empowerment Group, noticing DST's exclusively-male team leader meeting happening simultaneously on the opposite end of the park; the gender divide was certainly stark and honestly unsettling in that moment (Field Notes, 10/7/20). Because the organizational model reproduces the hegemonic paradigm of capitalist social stratification, I found that DST had difficulty providing meaningfully-equitable opportunities and environments. This hegemonic paradigm made it more difficult for folks who are mothers, grandmothers, disabled, mentally-ill, addicted, sick, or elderly to participate and to take on leadership. As I discussed earlier, DST makes room for some folks whom the free market's narrow definition of "worker" doesn't accommodate, but the work-based organizational model almost-inevitably replicates capitalist hierarchies to some extent and doesn't fully realize equity.

Braedley & Luxton (2010) assert in their book, *Neoliberalism and Everyday Life*, that the neoliberal paradigm has reinscribed social hierarchies and that "neoliberalism is no longer an alternative to hegemonic political thought as it was in the mid-twentieth century. It is hegemonic political thought" (p. 10). Neoliberalism, the prevailing, hegemonic, political-economic paradigm that intensifies free-market capitalism, values unfettered competition above all else, which inevitably maintains an uneven playing field and results in inequality. Deregulated free-market conditions disadvantage women and Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) communities in particular. As the authors note, neoliberalism in practice "has resulted in a global decline in women's

positions and material well-being” because under deregulated markets, more women are relegated to more insecure, low-paying work with fewer benefits (p. 13). In addition, “women have typically been responsible for most of the unpaid work of social reproduction” which undermines “their capacities to compete equally in the labour market with those unencumbered by family responsibilities” (p. 14). Compounding the factors that systematically overwork and exploit women, “neoliberalism’s commitments to reducing state expenditures” erode programs for universal childcare and paid family leave, which further disadvantages women’s ability to compete and thrive (Braedley & Luxton, 2010,).

Braedley & Luxton’s writing on neoliberalism’s hegemony and its consequences for reinscribing social stratification is echoed by Silvia Federici’s (2012) work on capitalism’s exploitation of domestic labor. Federici (2012) contends that the unwaged domestic labor of women is naturalized and used to reproduce the labor power of society; therefore, women’s unwaged labor bolsters capitalism, unjustly exploits women, keeps women oppressed in a capitalist society, and should be compensated to actually pursue women’s liberation (p. 8).

The added burden of a Team Member being a mother or grandmother is among the various factors, listed previously in this section, that couldn’t be fully accommodated for in DST’s work-based model. Team Members bearing especially marginalized identities and burdens, like that of having family responsibilities, had more difficulty achieving success and leadership as they are defined by DST. The first time on field study that I met Team Member Ramona, she described many aspects of her personal

history and life, including that she has always been the primary caretaker of her family since she was a teenager (Field Notes, 7/24/20). Ramona told Helena, a Case Manager, and me that she has always felt used, exploited, and unappreciated in the primary caretaker role that she has always assumed, or rather, been forced into (Field Notes, 7/24/20). Throughout my field study, Ramona consistently expressed to me how stressed she was about caring for her 20-year-old son, Oliver, who lives with a severe cognitive delay and who had been experiencing homelessness with her for several years (Field Notes, 10/29/20).

Ramona's obligation to caring for Oliver was a recurring barrier to finding formal employment and to working on some of her other goals. This was the case for several other female Team Members who bore family responsibilities that often limited the number of days that they could work with DST and held them back from pursuing other kinds of goals and successes. Though Team Members being mothers and grandmothers weren't the only social locations that DST's work-based model had trouble fully accommodating, they were certainly among the most prominent in my perspective. The cases of female Team Members also provide a well-illuminated case example of how a work-based organizational model that claims to prioritize equity can simultaneously reproduce the social stratification of a hegemonic, neoliberal, capitalist system.

As I did in my discussion about DST bridging the gap for folks left behind by formal employment, I must give DST some credit for its attempt, at least, to prioritize equity and accommodation. Ramona's son Oliver eventually joined the team, and when he did, we assigned him to the Downtown team, which is what staff usually does for

Team Members who need a more simple, less strenuous, more consistent, and more supportive route and team (Field Notes, 10/29/20). Liam, a Team Member who lives with an HIV-positive status, is another example of a Team Member living with an illness or disability who was accommodated based on personal ability. When Liam was diagnosed with HIV and when he started to have difficulty regulating his body temperature due to his diagnosis, he wasn't able to participate on shift anymore. DST staff accommodated him with a new assignment to "sanitation lead" that allowed him to stay back and clean the supplies while still earning full stipends (Field Notes, 8/3/20). These are but two of many examples peppered throughout my field notes that attest to DST's expressed commitment to "only ask that Team Members do their best and what they are capable of" (Field Notes, 11/2/20).

### **Community perceptions of homelessness**

Among DST's stated goals is to change community perceptions of homelessness, and the organizational model attempts to realize this goal by placing unhoused folks in roles that demonstrate personal responsibility, moral virtue, work ethic, and "deservingness" of acceptance and support. At every team success meeting during my field study, a staff member would ask the Team Members, "what are we trying to do at DST?" to which a Team Member would inevitably respond, "change perceptions of homelessness!" (Field Notes, 11/12/20). While it's transformational for Team Members to play active roles in the community and consequently receive community acceptance and gratitude, "changing" community perceptions of

homelessness by reinforcing the hegemonic ideology of rugged individualism has troublesome implications. The literature on the topic demonstrates that community perceptions of homelessness do matter-- they are decisive in public policy that is intended to solve, alleviate, or manage homelessness (Tsai et al., 2017). Since the 1990s, public support for federal spending on homelessness has increased and because many homelessness-related policies are decided and implemented on the local level, the public has particularly decisive power over how homelessness is solved or managed in their communities (Tsai et al., 2017, p. 604-5). Pudup (2017) writes that housed community members wield the power to influence public policy regarding homelessness; “not all housed people vote, but the overwhelming majority of people who vote are housed” (p. 11). Furthermore, “The homeless population is not a voting constituency with any political power. For better and worse, the homeless very much depend on the kindness of strangers” (Pudup, 2017, p. 10). Put bluntly, then, DST is right; community perceptions of homelessness matter.

Data show that in Santa Cruz, a majority of housed residents are informed about the complex drivers of homelessness, have compassion for people experiencing homelessness, and are “willing to commit more community resources to address homelessness” (Pudup, 2017, p. 68). It’s clear that homelessness is an overwhelming crisis in Santa Cruz County that constituents care about solving compassionately, so why are there no real, meaningful, upstream solutions in sight? If we, as a community, are willing to look at the crisis of homelessness with empathy and with determination to solve it, but aren’t willing to dislodge the systems, paradigms, and cultural values that created and perpetuate the crisis, then perhaps nothing will ever change. To change

community perceptions of homelessness is a hopeful and a useful goal. However, there are limits to pursuing this goal through hegemonic ideology in a community where the crisis has no end in sight despite already established public support.

From my perspective, there is one aspect of DST's endeavor to change community perceptions of homelessness that is of particular importance, and that is when Team Members participate in meaningful activity and personally receive acceptance and appreciation from the broader community. Community ostracization and stigmatization brought on by the experience of homelessness are profoundly traumatizing and detrimental. Goffman (1963) writes that a stigmatized individual experiences discrimination which reduces their life chances (p. 5) and cuts them off from society to stand alone as a "discredited person facing an unaccepting world" (p. 19). Stigmatization is part and parcel with Bourgois and Schonberg's (2009) theorization of abuse which identifies structural violence, everyday violence, and symbolic violence as powerful forces in the lives of people experiencing homelessness. "Structural violence refers to how the political-economic organization of society wreaks havoc on vulnerable categories of people;" everyday violence refers to "the social production of indifference in the face of institutionalized brutalities;" finally, symbolic violence "refers specifically to the mechanisms that lead those who are subordinated to 'misrecognize' inequality as the natural order of things and to blame themselves for their location in their society's hierarchies" (Bourgois & Schonberg, 2009, pp. 16-7). These variations of violence are so prevalent in the lives of people experiencing homelessness that hearing "thank you" from the community is a big deal and a source of pride for Team Members. One day when I asked Team Member Arthur what his favorite part of working with DST



was, part of his answer was that he loves when “people say thank you and are grateful for the cleaning up we do” (Field Notes, 7/8/20). When I joined Arthur and his team on their shift that day, we heard “thank yous” from passing community members several times, and throughout my field study whenever I joined Team Members on their shifts these “thank yous” came to be expressions of community gratitude that I consistently heard (Field Notes, 7/8/20). In my experience, this community acceptance of and gratitude for Team Members mitigated everyday violence in their lives in a profound and counter-hegemonic way. I understood that this mitigation of everyday violence was achieved by exploiting the community’s rugged individualist sentiments, yet all the same it meant a great deal to Team Members and must be acknowledged as an important aspect of DST’s model.

On field study, I also noticed how the community treated Team Members when they weren’t working. During a chat with my colleagues, I learned that DST was receiving complaints about how Team Members “loiter” outside of and in the areas surrounding DST’s office (Field Notes, 8/31/20). According to my colleagues, this “loitering” gets attributed to DST and is politically unfavorable (Field Notes, 8/31/20). Furthermore, I learned at the beginning of my field study that DST staff has to escort Team Members to the office building’s bathroom because Team Members have experienced harassment from other folks in the building when walking there alone (Field Notes, 7/9/20). Team Members seemed to receive gratitude and acceptance when they were working, but not under any other circumstances. These instances highlight the limitations and problems of “changing” community perceptions of homelessness through

work opportunities for unhoused folks. I speculate that because DST's strategy reinforces the hegemony of rugged individualist ideology, it can't meaningfully transform community perceptions and values in a systematic way that truly transforms how we commit to solving homelessness. Because community perceptions aren't changing in meaningful ways and the material conditions and marginalized social locations of unhoused folks remain largely the same, people experiencing homelessness learn how to make the best of a bad, unfair, and unethical deal; a deal that forces them to cope with violence and scarcity on a regular basis. Sometimes this means playing the system, and sometimes it means mobilizing counter-hegemonic community outside of those systems.

### **Navigating neoliberalism**

Among the tactics that DST pursued and cultivated to fight neoliberal scarcity in the lives of Team Members is case management. Again and again on field study, I discovered that Case Managers wielded the capability to "play the system" and avoid neoliberal welfare-state rationing of benefits through their cultural capital, expertise, and extensive list of community contacts (Field Notes, e.g. 7/29/20, 8/7/20, 8/10/20, 9/22/20, 10/13/20, 10/26/20, 10/30/20). Case Managers' brilliant ability to navigate the system consistently created some of the best outcomes possible for Team Members within existing structural norms. However, DST's model also fostered community-building among Team Members, which contributed decisively to Team Members navigating neoliberal scarcity to meet basic needs. In fact, I found that Team Members' tight-knit community was a crucial tool to help Case Managers do their most effective work.

## **Building and strengthening community**

Building community and social capital is another counter-hegemonic paradigm present in DST's model and one that stood out to me. Through their participation in DST, Team Members built a uniquely tight-knit community and spent much of their time outside of DST operations with each other. During my field study, Team Members' self-designated "spot" was beside the Levee at "the stump," and Team Members could often be found there before and after shift, hanging out, sharing food, and being in community with each other (Field Notes, 8/12/20, 10/15/20). I often heard from Team Members and saw from their interactions that they are more than friends; they consider each other family (Field Notes, 7/24/20, 7/29/20, 8/12/20, 11/24/20). Bourgois and Schonberg (2009) found a similar dynamic in their ethnography *Righteous Dopefiend*, which they interpret through a framework of moral economy. They define the moral economy of unhoused communities as "the boundaries of networks that provide companionship and also facilitate material survival" (p. 83). Unhoused folks can be enveloped in a "web of mutual obligations" that establish "the boundaries of their community" (p. 6). "Inevitably," they write, "under conditions of scarcity, the help given to one person is at the expense of another who is in desperate need" (p. 84). Social capital, the "features of social organization such as networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit" (Cheff & Oliver, 2014, p. 643), is crucial in unhoused communities for establishing moral economies and promoting material survival in the face of precarity.

Several times on field study, Team Members demonstrated their commitment to each other's wellbeing. To illustrate, Team Member Charlie was scheduled for a phone

interview with the manager of the Association of Faith Communities (AFC) shelter after he had been kicked out of another shelter. Team Member Bernard stayed with Charlie to make sure that he made the interview and told Case Manager Sarah, “Of course I stayed with him, we are a family and we can’t just let him stay on the streets” (Field Notes, 9/11/20). A few days later, Charlie was scheduled to move his belongings up to the AFC shelter. On the move-in day, Team Members Bernard and Raf were right there beside Charlie with his belongings in tow (Field Notes, 9/15/20). At another point on field study, the fortitude of the “DST family” saved Team Member Harry’s life. Harry was battling alcoholism, close to death, and waiting for the detox center, Janus, to open one of their few designated MediCal beds for him. Team Members Bernard and Vince didn’t leave Harry’s side at “the stump” for several days until he was finally picked up by Janus staff; Bernard and Vince even ended up missing shift to stay with Harry and keep him alive (Field Notes 9/8/20). DST’s model effectively helped Team Members build social capital, which proved to facilitate Team Member wellbeing in a way that hegemonic paradigms cannot. The counter-hegemonic paradigm of building community and social capital is a long-practiced tradition that draws on marginalized communities’ assets to cultivate belonging, support, agency, and wellness (Cheff & Oliver, 2014).

Malik was among the Team Members whom I became closest to on field study, and one of the first times that I met him I asked him to tell me his favorite part of DST. With confidence, he said that camaraderie and friendship were his favorite parts of being a Team Member.

His answer surprised me a little bit because he seems to be more of the “lone wolf” type than some of the other Team Members, but he smiled and had a sense of warm sincerity when he talked about it (Field Notes, 7/9/20).

### **Conclusion**

We cannot meaningfully address nor solve homelessness without a deep reckoning with our societal values, ideologies, and systems that produce and exacerbate the issue in its presently severe and devastating state. Considering the conditions, geography, and housing market of Santa Cruz, where homelessness has become a profoundly inhumane and neglected crisis, it’s clear that meaningful solutions are neither apparent nor prioritized. I speculate that counter-hegemonic paradigms emerge from this acute crisis precisely because of its severity. While DST’s existence and fortitude as an organization are attributed to its adherence to hegemonic paradigms, DST’s work and the counter-hegemony that emerges from it nonetheless contribute value, humanity, dignity, and quality to the lives of Team Members. I believe that this kind of counter-hegemony that involves people experiencing homelessness in the community, in dignifying work, and in the lives of each other, is a valuable and special undertaking that is seriously lacking from mainstream homeless services; this is potentially because homeless services through their participation in the non-profit industrial complex inevitably reproduce hegemony and constitute the hegemonic homeless-industry. DST proves that while hegemony and counter-hegemony can coexist, we must prioritize counter-hegemony in order to imagine a better future where the dominant paradigm won’t allow marginality or precarity, and where community means that dignity is a basic human right.

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